

I remember a scene from the television coverage of the First Gulf War in 1991. As our troops swiftly advanced and rapidly overcame Saddam's army, a young American soldier came upon Iraqis who had dug themselves in a defensive position. The Iraqis were surrendering, and the camera caught a young Iraqi soldier struggling to get out of his foxhole. The American soldier then extended his hand to help him.

That soldier's compassion for someone who was his enemy just a few moments earlier reflects the decency that is the heart of America. Even as we have the obligation and duty to defend ourselves and to make hard decisions about when it is appropriate to go to war and when it is not, our way of thinking does not lend itself to creating permanent enemies.

The United States is the most generous country on earth, but the events of these last weeks have deeply offended and angered many of us. Our Ambassador to Libya and three other Americans are dead. Anti-American demonstrations around the Middle East and South Asia continue. Our efforts at humanitarian assistance and development to create international stability seem to incite the flag burning mobs. Nebraskans are questioning our policies and ongoing assistance to countries in the region. As I have said, we will tolerate ingratitude, we will tolerate insult, but we will not tolerate the killing of an official representative of our country.

We must now skillfully sort through the repercussions to understand these events in light of the unfolding 21st century geo-political dynamic. It is important to note that the Libyan government, despite its weak structure, did respond aggressively and publicly to condemn the attack, and to commit resources to help the United States find the perpetrators. Libya has vast ungoverned territory, full of weapons, a worrisome fact in the aftermath of last year's NATO-led campaign to stop Gaddafi from slaughtering his own people. In the fluid situation unfolding now, Libyans are taking back enclaves from militias and publicly thanking the United States. This is helpful.

In Egypt the story is a bit different. A new government recently came to power and is decidedly shifting the country's long-standing relationship with the United States. When a mob scaled the walls of the U.S. Embassy in Cairo, that mob, in effect, invaded sovereign territory. The slow and conflicted response of the Egyptian president (who was educated in America) further indicates the challenges facing the United States and Egypt if we are to restore the previously stable relationship.

After World War II the United States was cast in the role of a superpower. We rebuilt Europe, picked up the pieces of colonialism, and countered the destructive collectivist ideology of communism. We also became resource interdependent. Many Americans sacrificed dearly for the preservation of international order for the sake of our own security; they were also guided by the deeper principle of the inherent rights and dignity of each person. This is why our soldiers extend a hand after the battle is done.

This international order is rapidly changing. We do not live in a perfect world, and it is tempting to say: "We're done." Technology is rapidly expanding, which can do great good or great harm. Communication is rapidly expanding, which can do great good or great harm. Transportation options are rapidly expanding, for great good or great harm. When people use our country's goodwill to turn against us with violence, it is natural and appropriate to wrestle with whether or not we are making a wise investment to engage at all.

The world needs America – our deep values of respect, the philosophical underpinnings of liberty, and our economic model that gives rise to self-sufficiency and community cohesion. We should also expect from the world fair trading conditions, respect for human rights, and just governing structures. We must also steel ourselves with the necessary decisions to get our own fiscal house in order. A return to the "Made in America" label would help. Strengthening our resolve within – and projecting that resolve to the world – will advance our own security and lay before others a vision that humanity desperately needs.